

## “Grammatology in the Carceral State: Writing, the Human, and Abolitionist Pedagogies”

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### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between rhetoric, the Human, and temporality in the carceral state. It builds on Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of writing in *Of Grammatology* as the overall circulation of signs and signifiers. By reading Derrida and Black feminist interpretations of the Human in conjunction, this article interrogates how writing sustains the carceral and anti-Black category of the Human through institutionalized knowledge. It does so by answering three primary questions: How does the West weaponize writing to normalize a Human/non-Human dichotomy? What is the relationship between writing, carcerality, and linear temporality? How do Western grammars ontologize their originary moment in the slave trade to justify the association of criminality with Blackness? The final portion of this article builds on numerous abolitionist scholar-activists to demonstrate how abolition, as a political and epistemological praxis, creates pockets of resistance, life, and uncertainty to transform how race, the Human, and writing are conceptualized.

### Introduction: The Human and an Economy of Exchange

*[E]conomy is not a reconciliation of opposites, but rather a maintaining of disjunction. Identity constituted by difference is economy. In Freud’s world, a train of thought is sustained by its opposite, a unit of meaning that contains the possibility of its opposite. –Spivak, pp. lxiii*

In the above quote, Gayatri Spivak highlights the relationship between identity and economics as constructed by a Derridean understanding of writing. In the preface to her translation of *Of Grammatology*, she argues that Jacques Derrida conceptualizes writing as “the dream-content—a paradigm of the entire memory-work of the psyche—[that] ‘is given...in a picture-[not phonetic] script’...what we think of as ‘perception’ is always already an inscription” (lix-lx). As such, writing and rhetoric extend beyond intelligible inscriptions and, instead, encompass the overall process of signification, i.e. how signs are attached to signifiers and ascribed meaning in society. In this essay, I argue that writing, as Derrida articulates it, is integral in the production and maintenance of the anti-Black and carceral category of the Human as the ideal Western subject. I further contend

that abolitionist pedagogies<sup>1</sup> and epistemologies are one means by which Western grammars<sup>2</sup> can be disrupted. Specifically, signification produces an economy of difference in which the Self is defined by its opposition, i.e. what it is *not*; thus, the Human is white, cis, male, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied because the Other is not (Cacho; Weheliye; Derrida). The assignation of meaning to signs becomes a necessity in categorizing and regulating the population, rendering bodies as intelligible datapoints in the West<sup>3</sup>.

To demonstrate how signification becomes a regulatory process, I argue that rhetoric produces identarian capture by dictating who can/cannot be an intelligible subject under the carceral state. Blackness, as a visual and rhetorical signifier, is always already associated with guilt and criminality in civil society<sup>4</sup> (Gramsci; Weheliye). As such, Blackness is framed as both threatening to and deviating from the Human, justifying systems like mass incarceration and police brutality. By reading Hortense Spillers and Jacques Derrida in conversation, I demonstrate how particular grammars are marked as illegible in the West, unable to be recognized as coherent or legitimate memory-work or script<sup>5</sup>. Illegibility is a necessity for the West to define its exterior by demarcating which bodies and grammars are always already threatening to the position of the Human.

In the process of circulating and producing legitimate lexicons, writing and the Human are entangled with temporality. I demonstrate this by reading Derrida's interpretation of writing and forgetfulness, in a Freudian lens, in conjunction with Alexander Weheliye's explanation of the Human based on critical Black race-radical feminist theories from *Habeus Viscus*. By doing so, I argue that, in the West, memory-work is partially sustained by historical amnesia, an intentional forgetting of past events to defer change, particularly for settler colonialism and

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<sup>1</sup> Abolition is an expansion of prison abolition, which Critical Resistance, a national organization, defines as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" ("What"). Erica Meiners builds on this definition to frame abolitionism as a process that "involves the potentially more challenging work to build up networks, sites, and languages that facilitate self-determination and liberation. This necessitates moving away from the site of the prison to critically engage conceptions such as safety and justice, as well as the wider frames and artifacts that serve as their condition of possibility" (19).

<sup>2</sup> The term "grammar," for this paper, encompasses the circulation of signs and signifiers, both rhetorical and otherwise. *Western* grammars, then, describes how Western systems of knowledge instill and propagate idealized modes of Being through rhetorical, affective, and mediatic exchange.

<sup>3</sup> While the West can be defined or understood in geographic terms, i.e. the United States, Canada, and European countries, the West, here, will refer to Western ideologies (Weheliye). This is because while some bodies may be *in* the geographic West, they are not necessarily read as Western or assimilated into infrastructures of capitalism, racism, and so on. Western *ideologies*, then, encapsulate the overarching systems of power that Western empires rely on to sustain themselves (Wang).

<sup>4</sup> Here, civil society is based on Antonio Gramsci's definition of civil society, one of two "superstructural levels" that relates individuals to the "world of production," the other level being "political society' or 'the State'" (12). Specifically, he argues that civil society is "the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private,'" and intertwines with political society to form "the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society" (12).

<sup>5</sup> Here, the term "memory-work" is used to describe the kinds of knowledge and impulses that operate within our psyches. In the circulation of signs and signifiers, we are indoctrinated into Westernized modes of thinking and Being that come to represent memory-work under Empire. However, as a question of the psyche informed by relationality and knowledge production, memory-work is in a perpetual process of deconstruction and reconstruction (Derrida).

the slave trade, which bleeds into the present under the carceral state in systems like the prison-industrial-complex (PIC)<sup>6</sup> (Davis; Dillon). Through historical amnesia, Western institutions divorce themselves from past foundational violences to frame themselves as benevolent actors who hold no accountability as the past, present, and future are constructed as distinct temporal zones. The West “forgets” its basis in chattel slavery and colonial genocide to maintain a façade of civilizational progress. In tandem with historical amnesia, I argue that linear Western temporality turns the future into a zone of safety for Western subjects. As such, writing is integral in the production of static identity categories for management, surveillance, and risk calculus (Gaonkar; Puar; Öberg; Bifo). The ability to simulate, predict, and preempt potential threats thus hinges on accurate information, necessitating the expansion of carceral systems, such as the police, PIC, and legal doctrine designed to punish and surveil unintelligible, and inherently threatening, bodies (Rodriguez “Racial/Colonial”; Dillon; Weheliye). This occurs not only domestically, but also internationally through expanded warfare to gain access to increasing amounts of datapoints and information.

The ability to simulate and predict warfare through the information economy necessitates establishing an origin in the teleology of Western grammars. As such, I argue that writing comes to function within a primitive/brink figuration by building on J. Rosenberg’s article, “The Molecularization of Sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, writing is a perpetual process of (re)signification that functions simultaneously as the beginning, present, and endpoint of signs. The West attempts to stabilize the fluidity of writing by establishing an origin of Western grammars in the slave trade as a foundational system wherein Black bodies were reduced to mere flesh, the antithesis of the Human (Spillers). In tandem with this originary moment, rhetoric came to be structured by a transcendence of the Human itself (a post-Human enterprise). Through semiotics, Whiteness becomes the universal norm and presumed subject of writing as a marker of the Human while simultaneously moving beyond the political limits of Human agency (King). Under racial and carceral capitalism, the primitive/brink figuration of writing is used to stabilize the Human as an abstraction of temporality that contributes to the drive for accumulation (Rosenberg).

As a response to racial and carceral capitalism, I argue that abolition, as a political praxis, builds alternative grammars and modes of relationality. I do so by expanding on two primary points. First, abolition is necessarily affective as a communal and interpersonal project oriented towards the end of carceral systems (Rodriguez “Disorientation”). The production of affective ties between individuals, and uses of affects, such as rage, sorrow, and hope for building different futures, are unintelligible to Western grammars. I contend that, in the construction of the Human, the West idealizes rationality and a divestment from

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I use Angela Davis’ definition of the prison-industrial-complex as a term that refers to how “the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is...linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies,” particularly a binary of guilt/innocence (2).

affect as affect is unpredictable and transcends Western writing (Shanks). As such, abolition's imbuing of memory-work and political praxes with affect creates a different kind of writing, one that is unintelligible to civil society and deconstructs the Human.

Abolition further disrupts the Human through non-linear temporality. Specifically, Dylan Rodriguez writes that abolition is built on "genealogies of freedom struggle that emerge in direct, radical confrontation with genocidal and protogenocidal regimes: lineages of political intellectual creativity and organized, collective (and at times revolutionary) insurgency that have established the foundations on which people have relied to build life-sustaining movements" ("Racial/Colonial" 810). As a result, abolitionist movements and collectivities utilize historical memory to inform present struggles and develop visions of different futures. In the process, abolitionism disrupts Western temporality by reading the past, present, and future as co-imblicated. Through constantly evolving interpretations of the past, present, and future, abolitionism evades temporal and rhetorical capture by Western simulations of threats and preemption, disrupting the Western construction of the Human (Bifo). In this process, abolitionism creates alternative grammars that are imbued with affect and historical memory to guide struggles for a better future.

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*last night i dreamt  
of worlds, far away  
where we drifted together  
amongst galaxies, swirling red and blue  
colors and lights brighter  
than i'd ever seen<sup>7</sup>*

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## Rhetoric and the Reproduction of the Human

*[R]hetoric is rooted in a false ontology. [Rhetoric] is content to deal with what appears to be true and good rather than inquire into what it is in reality. –Gaonkar, pp. 5*

Here, Dilip Gaonkar expands on Plato to articulate why rhetoric is always already an incomplete project, which I further elaborate on in the context of the Human. This raises the question of what, precisely, is the Human? According to Claire Colebrook, "Fixed kinds...are expressions of a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as *the* [H]uman...the being who

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<sup>7</sup> The poems throughout this piece are inspired by Jackie Wang's final chapter in *Carceral Capitalism* as she imagines prison abolition through numerous styles of writing. For me, the stars, as a locus of theorizing abolition, invokes a zone of liminality. The stars, from where we came and where we inevitably all return, are simultaneously all-encompassing and not-yet here, much like abolition and writing as ateloeological projects in a constant process of Becoming.

recognizes himself as becoming through difference. Difference becomes the way man becomes nothing other than becoming and refuses the nightmare of indifference” (228-229, emphasis in original). As such, the Human is constituted in an economy of difference sustained, at least partially, through writing and the production of a stable subject.

Since the Human is an evolving figure in Western modernity and politics, as specific bodies previously considered non-Human may be integrated into Humanity, rhetoric and writing are always incomplete and ateleological. However, the Human, by necessity, remains defined by what it is *not*. As such, the economy of difference “is a metaphor of energy—where two opposed forces playing against each other constitute the so-called identity of a phenomenon” (Spivak lxii). Order is sustained by binaries and opposition, bodies who threaten (but simultaneously define) the Human are conscripted into the zone of *disorder* and deviance. Modernity produces deviance through a co-constitutive process of phobia and philia: the fear of difference as a threat to order and stability in the West, yet the simultaneous need and desire for the Other to define the Self (Rodriguez “Racial/Colonial”; King). According to Derrida, “The system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’...through the phonic substance...had to dominate the history of the world...has even produced the idea of the world...in terms of the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the inside and the outside” (8). While hearing is not integral in writing or the circulation of signs, it is one example of how signs transcend images and written word and implicate other senses. “Hearing-as-understanding,” then, is only possible through the assignation of meaning onto signs through a collective Western psyche, i.e. the unending process of (re)signification inculcated by the circulation of mediatic images, the education and legal systems, and other linguistic processes, thus producing identity and difference *through* writing.

As writing is a process of making bodies intelligible, there must always be an exterior to the interior of civil society. Blackness is always unintelligible in the West, the exterior by which order is defined (Spillers; King). Under the carceral state, this is propagated by the guilt/innocence paradigm, which dictates that certain bodies are scripted as always already guilty of crime and deserving of punishment (Cacho; Wang). Specifically, Jackie Wang states in *Carceral Capitalism* that the “guilt-innocence schematization...fails to grapple with the fact that there is an a priori association of [B]lackness with guilt (criminality)” (263). As such, Western grammars produce a collective psyche that is built on an implicit association of Blackness with guilt and Whiteness with innocence. The guilt/innocence dualism is used to justify the mass incarceration of Black and Brown bodies who are presumed guilty, even when proven innocent, and the manifestation of quotidian anti-Black violence. This collective psyche is (re)produced through “constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts [and] the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the [H]uman” (Weheliye 3). Therefore, legal infrastructures cannot be disentangled

from discourses or epistemologies normalized in the circulation of signs in the West, as they are always co-constitutive in the production of the Human as an inherently anti-Black and carceral paradigm.

Within legal systems, specifically, the Human is scripted in relationship to the intelligibility of pain and the circulation of affect. According to Weheliye, “suffering becomes the defining feature of those subjects excluded from the law, the national community, humanity, and so on due to the political violence inflicted upon them even as it, paradoxically, grants them access to inclusion and equality” (75). While this manifests across the entire political and social landscape of civil society, in this paper, I focus on the judiciary and its circulation of pain in court cases. Specifically, in the judiciary, Black people are simultaneously hypercriminalized and policed, yet unable to win court cases as Humans without articulating sufficient injury, civility, and respectability to be worthy of reparation (Alexander; Weheliye). Speech-as-writing becomes only contingently intelligible to the judge or jury; as such, suffering becomes endemic to racialized bodies, a necessary condition by which they attain an almost-Human status. White institutions and individuals come to fetishize and desire witnessing, hearing, and circulating narratives of the suffering of racialized bodies for consumption. In this way, capitalism accelerates into semicapitalism, a stage of capitalism in which semiotics, such as affects, signs, and images, are circulated and exchanged in the information economy as goods are no longer purely material (Shanks; Wang; Bifo). As such, affects of pain, suffering, and so on merge with identity to formulate not only economies of difference, but also cybernetic economies wherein data functions as currency.

Under the information economy, narratives of suffering are intertwined with a politics of recognition. Wang argues that “[s]ocial, political, cultural, and legal recognition happens only when a person is thoroughly whitewashed, neutralized, and made unthreatening” (262). To demonstrate sufficient injury to the judiciary, then, is to rely on being recognized as a legitimate subject, i.e. as Human. Under the carceral state, Blackness is read as inherently threatening, legitimizing mass incarceration and creating the inability of the judiciary to recognize Black bodies as Human (Alexander; Cacho). This results in a legal enterprise where police brutality and the hypersurveillance of Black communities can occur without judicial repercussions. This is seen in how the Black Lives Matter movement, which protests, for example, the rising murder rates of Black people by the police, is framed as controversial and threatening by the media<sup>8</sup>. The circulation of news stories thus inscribes a particular political and social meaning to the movement, making it incapable of being recognized as a legitimate political orientation. It also results in the dehumanization of Black bodies who are murdered or experience violence at the hands of the carceral state as the police

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<sup>8</sup> Political and mediatic narratives in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Derek Chauvin, in particular, demonstrate the prioritization of property and capital over Black life. In response to property destruction, protesters were labeled “looters” and “rioters,” disparaging outcry against not only Floyd’s murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police, but also against systemic anti-Black violence and death.

rarely face repercussions for killing Black people, even when there is video evidence.

In tandem with recognition, the circulation of affect in political institutions (and the media), under semiocapitalism, results in “cruel optimism” (Berlant 1). Cruel optimism is a phrase coined by Lauren Berlant that refers to “[a] relation...when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). This manifests in civil society as all individuals are raised to place faith in political, social, and economic institutions that, in reality, inhibit our potential for growth and creativity through labor exploitation, targeted violence, and other forms of inequality. Berlant goes on to argue that “fantasy and survival are indistinguishable effects of the affects’ own informal economy. To be made to *desire* a normativity hangover trains the audience in cruel optimism” (178, emphasis in original). The media uses images and signs to circulate narratives of overcoming and resilience within a capitalist and anti-Black society; in the process, the “audience” exposed to said signs comes to develop cruelly optimistic attachments to political institutions and belief in individualist frameworks of success. Under semiocapitalism, stories are turned into a currency that are consumed, circulated, and desired by the population to demonize dissent. This results in a de-radicalization of much of the non-Black Western population as individuals are inculcated to participate in capitalist paradigms of production, consumption, and labor without question. As such, the assimilation of non-Black populations into economies of production is also a form of *racial* capitalism as non-Black bodies aspire to White norms of respectability and agency<sup>9</sup> (Wang). Simultaneously, it creates justifications for the vilification of Black bodies who “fail” to overcome capitalist and anti-Black structures by tokenizing “successful” non-Black people of color. As a result, non-Black people of color who aspire towards Whiteness and the Human are parasitic on Black bodies whose deaths and incarceration are necessary for civil society to function.

While certain kinds of signs and writing come to function as currency, specific grammars remain unintelligible in civil society. According to Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” the Black body, as a captive body since the slave trade, is reduced to flesh based on cultural, political, and social norms of the West. Through writing and memory-work, the Black body comes to signify four things:

- 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time--in stunning contradiction--the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of

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<sup>9</sup> Here, I am thinking specifically about the conception of the Model Minority myth as a narrative weaponized to break Afro-Asian coalitions apart. The framing of particular East Asian bodies as the desirable racialized subject (almost white, but not quite) creates a racial hierarchy in which many East Asians come to be parasitic on Blackness in a futile attempt to assimilate to White political and social norms (Wang). Thus, the Model Minority myth pits racialized bodies against each other, fracturing coalitions and movements against racial capitalism.

“otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning (Spillers 67).

As the Black body is reduced to a perpetual condition of otherness, Black grammars of suffering, kinship, and so on are unintelligible in civil society. Western grammars are thus incapable of encompassing, articulating, or describing Black grammars and experiences. This is particularly true given “gratuitous violence,” one of Orlando Patterson’s tenets of social death (1982). Gratuitous violence is a term Patterson uses to explain the quotidian violence experienced by Black bodies in civil society since the slave trade; overkill, police brutality, and mass incarceration are all examples of how gratuitous violence manifests in the twenty-first century (Alexander). As anti-Black violence is normalized and overproduced, Western grammars are incapable of expressing the affective, physical, and emotional turmoil Black people experience, contributing to the relegation of Black bodies to a non-Human status. As such, the creation of alternative grammars to counteract and deconstruct Western grammars is a necessary sociopolitical project.

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*a hand reached out and  
pulled us close  
a whisper fluttered  
through my ears  
[you are lost, but together  
we find  
a miracle called  
freedom]*

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### **The Entanglement of Writing, the Human, and Temporality in Civil Society**

*For those bearing the brunt of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, the past, present, and future are not distinct temporal spaces...The past is an image of the future because the future will be a repetition of the past. –Dillon, pp. 41*

In the West, temporality is constructed as a linear teleology in which the past, present, and future are separate temporal zones without relationship. In the process, the collective Western psyche experiences historical amnesia as one manifestation of Freud’s understanding of “forgetfulness.” Specifically, Spivak writes that “in [Freud’s] early writings ‘forgetfulness’ makes its appearance in two opposed forms: as a limitation that protects the human being from the blinding light of an absolute historical memory...as well as an attribute...to avoid falling into the trap of ‘historical knowledge’” (1). I focus on the first form of forgetfulness

that Spivak explains. Historical memory, here, refers to events that the West attempts to erase from the memory-work of the population, such as slavery and colonial genocide, practices that were, and are, foundational to the creation and maintenance of civil society. Historical amnesia functions both as an attempt to divest the West, today, from violences it committed in the past, but also as a means of displacing critique of the evolution of chattel slavery and settler colonialism into the PIC and colonial exploitation, such as in oil pipelines that run through Indigenous land (Alexander; Meiners).

In the continuation of carceral logic as an anti-Black and settler colonial enterprise, the past comes to repeat itself in the present and future. Historical amnesia is thus impossible for racialized bodies since, as Stephen Dillon argues, “Time does not erase what has happened, dissolving terror and violence into the progress of the future, nor is the past passively sedimented in the present. Rather, the past returns to the present in expanded form” (42). Civil society’s foundational logics of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and more, reinvent and expand themselves under the carceral state in insidious ways, such as the evolution of slavery to the Jim Crow era to mass incarceration and police brutality (Dillon; Alexander). White institutions, however, weaponize historical amnesia to frame the critiques and dissent of Indigenous peoples and Black people as irrational, undeserved, and threatening to order in the West, allowing political and social infrastructures to continue unabated. Narratives of political progress, then, can only mean progress for those considered Human, ensuring that writing and temporality are perpetually intertwined in the production of difference.

In contrast to historical amnesia, linear Western temporality constructs the future as a zone of safety. I argue that this occurs in two ways: first, the future is where “progress” occurs, deferring political and social change (Dillon). According to Dillon, “The state describes the future as a space of safety and security in order to maintain the violence of the present, and to temper the rage of those who refuse to wait” (40). Western grammars sustain this through the circulation of mediatic images and stories, such as by framing Ferguson protesters as inherently violent “rioters,” or by citing institutional legislation as examples of progress (“at least slavery doesn’t exist!”) (Alexander; Meiners). Radical political orientations, communities, or acts, such as prison abolition, are demonized as irrational and dangerous threats to Western stability. Western writing thus comes to desire rationality as a characteristic of the Human, rendering affect destabilizing to order due to its unpredictability. The association of racialized and feminized bodies with emotion and irrationality, then, is a tactic to delegitimize their experiences of violence and pain in a racist and hetero-patriarchal society. However, the affect of pain surrounding the subjectivity of Black people, as explained through Weheliye above, *is* necessary to the carceral state as a precondition for non-Black people of color to aspire towards the category of the Human. Affect is thus simultaneously threatening and discredited due to its unintelligibility, yet necessary for semicapitalism and anti-Blackness to function.

Predictability is the second process by which the future is constructed as a zone of safety. Rhetorical and temporal control are necessarily co-constitutive in that predictions, through simulations, are required for the Western state to secure the continuation of empire by preempting and eradicating potential threats before they emerge (Gaonkar; Öberg; Bifo). The future must be made safe for the West, by force, if necessary; as such, “[T]he future can be anticipated only in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted temporality and can therefore only announce itself, *present* itself, in the species of monstrosity” (Derrida 5). Temporal sovereignty is sustained through an anticipatory logic and temporality, i.e. the need to anticipate the actions of all actors, including individuals, other nations, and even the environment (Puar “Prognosis” and *Terrorist*). According to Jasbir Puar, this creates a “risk economy that attempts to ensure against future catastrophe. This is a temporality of negative exuberance—for we are never safe enough, never healthy enough, never prepared enough” (*Terrorist*, xxvii). In an anticipatory temporality, all actors are potential threats, hence why the West never understands itself to be safe. In an economy of risk, “identity is understood not as essence, but as risk coding” (Puar, “Prognosis,” 165). Identity comes to signify discrete datapoints in a matrix of intelligibility, categories that enable the carceral state to read specific communities and bodies as inherently at-risk or deserving-of-risk. Redlining, for example, was a policy in the United States that allowed the government and companies to deny services, like insurance and healthcare, to specific communities based on how “risky” they were<sup>10</sup>. Risk became associated with racial characteristics as communities of color experienced significantly higher rates of healthcare and credit denial, resulting in racist housing policies and segregation, which has lasting effects today, such as in gerrymandering (Badger). As such, the stabilization of identity through Western grammars is necessary for the state to create calculations of risk and to instill hierarchies of power.

To perfect this process, the state must maximize transparency to create more efficient and accurate predictions. This is done by using writing to create simulations through expanded warfare (Öberg; Bifo). According to Dan Öberg, transparency ensures that the “global battlefield expands through the operational coding of a military architecture which constantly aims to make space and time a derivate of an operational planning model” (1140). As such, warfare no longer exists purely in physical space, but instead manifests in logistics, such as in war rooms for military planning. Here, war is literally simulated on hypothetical battlefields to calculate the most effective and efficient means of eradicating the non-Human enemy. Western grammars thus become a tool by which warfare expands into simulations; by creating economies of difference, writing transforms

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<sup>10</sup> This is, however, not to say that redlining no longer exists within the United States; rather, while the formal policy is no longer in place, health insurance companies, banks, and other institutions rely heavily on racialized notions of “risk” to determine which bodies are/not worthy of investment, security, etc. (Puar “Prognosis”).

bodies into intelligible datapoints on an information grid. Intervention becomes both a condition and result of predictions as intervention not only unveils more data about international actors and better enables Western surveillance, but also necessitates preemptive genocide to prevent the emergence potential threats to the West, such as in counter-terror operations performed in Afghanistan and Iraq that resulted (and continue to result) in thousands of deaths (Gaonkar; Öberg). Through the expansion of the surveillance state, the “international” and “domestic” come to signify not distinct political spheres, but entangled networks. Interventions in the Middle East are indicative of how the carceral state is exported globally as the United States comes to police the world. As such, the United States police force and military are not distinct institutions, but entwined assemblages of the Western war machine designed to eradicate the non-Human.

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*together we  
wandered  
moments of time  
of past  
of present  
of future  
danced by  
intertwined, like us, as  
one*

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## Writing and the Ontologization of Origins

*[F]ramings of the object as simultaneously ancestral and heralding a looming post-humanity...produce a kind of temporal abstraction that...occludes – by positing the object-world as “ancestral” and cryptically “to-come” – the present as an open field of political action. –Rosenberg*

In the quote above, J. Rosenberg is discussing what he calls the “ontological turn”: a divestment from present worlds to focus on primitive/brink narratives in academia’s shift towards molecularization as a locus of analysis (“Molecularization”). Here, however, I apply Rosenberg’s explanation of the primitive/brink figuration to writing. Specifically, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that “[t]here is no speech, then, as we know, no song, and thus no music, before articulation...convention has its hold only upon articulation, which pulls language out of the cry, and increases itself with consonants, tenses, and quantity. *Thus language is born out of the process of its own degeneration*” (264, emphasis in original). In the process of articulation and the production of memory-work, writing both seeks and produces its own origin while simultaneously destroying itself. The object that Rosenberg is referring to, in this

project, is writing, which emerges as both ancestral in origin, but also post-Human (to-come) as an immaterial and semiotic force.

To argue that writing operates within the primitive/brink dichotomy, I first focus on the primitivism of Western grammars and how they are origin-seeking in nature. Writing, in its many forms, manifests through articulation (in speech, physical inscriptions, images, and so on). The act of writing thus produces its own origin and demise in the (re)production of signs as the expansion of rhetoric is only possible with the signifier of the signifier. This, according to Derrida, “describes on the contrary the movement of language: in its origin, to be sure, but one already has the presentiment that an origin whose structure can be expressed thus—signifier of the signifier—flares up and erases itself in its own production. There the signified always already functions as signifier” (7). Signs themselves, then, function simultaneously as their own beginning and endpoint in the West, i.e. writing is necessarily ateleological as it lacks a coherent start or finish. The process of (re)signification divests signs from meaning as each iteration or manifestation of a sign imbues it with a different interpretation, hence how the evolution of writing presents the signifier of the signifier.

As the West conditions an idealized memory-work in the Western psyche, the “origin” of writing emerges as a cultural construct. Spillers says that “[t]he symbolic order that I wish to trace...an ‘American grammar,’ begins at the ‘beginning,’ which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation...that take[s] place on the subsaharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade” (68). Since writing is ateleological, the West must mark an originary moment to the American grammar to maintain a linear teleology of the past, present, and future. The slave trade comes to represent the historical (and ontological) origin of the symbolic order and Western grammars, abstracting writing from its fluctuating inception in articulation. To stabilize the temporality of language, then, is to dehistoricize and obfuscate the relationship between rhetoric and the inauguration of the political category of the Human.

Simultaneously, writing is captured within a brink figuration in the West. In “Humans Involved,” Tiffany Lethabo King indicts poststructuralism as a form of White transcendence. In this project, I recontextualize King’s criticisms of post-humanism to subjectlessness in writing. In the West, a dualism of material/immaterial is used to differentiate semiotics from corporeal infrastructures, such as the physical body and financialization. Western grammars become post-Human, in nature, as they are construed as devoid of subjectivity and agential capacity. As rhetoric is thought to be without subject and without identity, it ultimately operates under what King calls a “ruse of subjectlessness” as the “erasure of the ([W]hite) body-as-subject-as-ontology...[cover] the bloody trail of [W]hite/[H]uman-self-actualization” at the expense of Black and Indigenous life (178). The White, cis, middle-class, able-bodied male is the idealized Human subject. Whiteness, as the universalizing

norm and presumed subject of Western grammars, is both a defining characteristic of, yet also transcends, the Human, an instantiation of a brink figuration by operating as a line of flight *beyond* the Human.

The primitive/brink dichotomy of writing thus stabilizes the Human as an enterprise of carceral and racial capitalism. As Rosenberg argues, “The ontological turn’s relationship to time becomes clearer now not only as a primitive/brink logic, but also as a set of fantasies around production – fantasies that become particularly legible in terms of the political economy of primitive accumulation” (“Molecularization”). As consumption and production accelerate, the internal contradictions of capitalism are increasingly discernable: the necessity of both (re)producing the Human as a category for social control and literal reproduction of humans-as-laborers, but simultaneous need to (over)exploit bodies for labor until their premature death (Berlant; Rosenberg; Wang). By necessity, the nuclear family emerges as the ideal kinship formation, normalized through writing in films, advertisements, books, etc., to maximize (re)production so growth can continue towards infinity. Reproductive and affective labor thus become intrinsic to the continuation of carceral and racial capitalism, necessitating the exploitation of primarily feminized and racialized bodies to maximize the quality and length of life of Humans in the West.

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*when i awoke, i wondered  
instead of falling apart  
what would it mean to  
fall together  
and create  
and dream  
and desire  
with the stars to light our way*

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## Abolitionist Pedagogies and the Disruption of the Human

*[T]he will to ignorance, the joyful wisdom, must also be prepared to rejoice in uncertainty, to rejoice in and even—to will the reversal of all values that might have come to seem untenable. –Spivak, pp. xlix*

In the following section, I argue that abolition, as a political and epistemological praxis, is inherently unpredictable and thus destabilizes the category of the Human. First, I focus on how abolitionism is unpredictable, and thus unintelligible, to the carceral state. As I argued above, rationality is an idealized characteristic of the Human as it allows the West to maximize its ability to predict the actions of actors. Affect, however, is unpredictable and incapable of being captured linguistically or temporally by Western grammars. Abolitionist

movements are driven, at least in part, by affect in two ways: desires and interpersonal relationships. In terms of desire, abolitionism is sustained by “envisioning and ultimately constructing ‘a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscape of our society’” (Rodriguez “Disorientation” 7). As such, abolition is always already tied to affects of rage, sorrow, and hope for futures oppositional to Western grammars and the Human. By imbuing multiple psyches and memories with common affective and political goals, abolitionists evade and disrupt rhetorical and temporal capture. The West’s fear of radical political collectives, including abolitionists, is thus not without merit as they hold the means to unravel the grid by which the carceral state sustains itself, both discursively and epistemologically, but also through material resistance and protests on the streets.

In tandem with desires, abolitionist affects manifest in relationality through non-Western kinship formations. In *For the Children*, Erica Meiners writes, “Across the world people are imagining and building other forms of community and accountability...sharing and proliferating tools and engagements continues to be transformative” (21). Movements like INCITE!, the Black Panthers, and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective have, and continue to, move away from carceral punishment as a paradigm, instead focusing on transformative justice and community accountability (Palacios). For the purposes of this project, I use Lena Palacios’s explanation of transformative justice, a praxis that “seeks to develop strategies to address intimate, interpersonal, community, and structural violence from a political organizing and movement-building perspective in order to move beyond state-imposed, institutionalized criminal legal and punishment systems and professionalized social services” (94). As such, abolition is geared towards developing communities with strong interpersonal ties to ensure that when violence does occur, carceral-driven, punitive punishment is not the automatic response. Instead, collectives center support, healing, and intervention to challenge and help individuals unlearn racist and misogynistic practices and beliefs while also centering the voices and desires of survivors. In this way, abolitionists imbue grammars and memory with affect to undermine Western power dynamics, proving that writing and affect are not oppositional but rather co-constitutive and intertwined systems.

Transformative justice also disrupts the fixation on trauma by the Western media and judiciary. As I argued previously, civil society thrives on the consumption and circulation of narratives of suffering, making pain an intrinsic condition of being for racialized bodies, particularly women of color (Weheliye). Transformative justice, as one avenue for abolitionism, “shift[s] our collective gaze away from an overwhelming focus on a liberal politics of recognition and toward radical, resurgent alternatives to the carceral state” (Palacios 95). Rather than placing survivors on trial, a process that almost always re-traumatizes and exposes them to more violence, transformative justice centers healing. The judiciary forces survivors to prove they suffered sufficiently to win cases, functioning as a politics

of recognition. Empirically, since women of color, particularly Black and Indigenous women, are constructed as non-Human, their suffering is unintelligible to legal enterprises. Instead of centering Humanist interpretations of pain through recognition, abolitionists refuse the circulation of affect-as-capital under semiocapitalism to forefront alternatives to the carceral state.

Abolitionist collectives are also examples of building kinship formations outside of the nuclear family. Spillers writes that, under Western grammars, family is forced “to modify itself when it does not mean family of the ‘master,’ or dominant enclave. It is this rhetorical and symbolic move that declares primacy over any other human and social claim, and in that political order of things, ‘kin,’ just as gender formation, has no decisive legal or social efficacy” (75). In civil society, family is coded into intelligibility based on social and political recognition through blood relations, marriage, or guardianship, all of which rely on legal documentation and recognition. Communalism, such as in abolitionist collectives, is thus an unintelligible framework of making kin outside of politically coherent family structures. While this is not to say that abolitionist movements are perfect in their structure or politics, it *does* demonstrate that the inscription of nuclear family ideals occurs through the circulation of Western grammars across society. As such, these collectives disrupt the carceral state’s matrix of intelligibility by refusing normative kinship formations that are integral in sustaining the Human.

The second way abolitionism undermines modernity is by distorting Western temporality. Rather than theorizing temporality as linear or teleological, Palacios argues that “locating transformative justice feminism as process or praxis, rather than as something already existing or accomplished, allows it to remain a contradictory, unfinished, and ambiguous political project that rejects final solutions and ideological purity” (95). This, coupled with Rodriguez’s understanding of abolitionism as built on “genealogies of freedom,” shows how abolition is an ateleological project, much like writing itself (“Racial/Colonial” 810). As a perpetually incomplete and evolving political and epistemological praxis, abolition reads the past, present, and future as co-imbricated rather than distinct temporal zones. The past, present, and future are thus constantly affecting each other; developing new understandings and relationships to the past creates different interpretations of the present and informs evolving goals and visions for future changes and communities. Since abolition emerges as an ateleological and unfinished project, it is unpredictable to the carceral state. Western grammars are incapable of comprehending or articulating the project of abolition, a praxis that cannot be conscripted into the political matrix. According to Franco “Bifo” Berardi, the way out from the symbolic order exists in “you, the unpredictable” (“Game”). In a system that thrives on predictability and preemption, the Human can only be undermined by inducers of chaos, individuals and collectives that cannot be mapped into simulations of future chains of events or categorized in discrete subject positions.

This is not, however, an argument on “transcending” the Human through affect or writing. Rather, this is an interrogation of how Western grammars, as semiotics, come to stabilize anti-Black and carceral institutions. As King argues, “there are often reversals of the order and hierarchies of structural oppositions; the reversals fail to actually overcome and annihilate the need and desire for structural opposition as an actual order of knowledge” (177). Western grammars, then, evolve to incorporate bodies previously considered non-Human into the symbolic order, such as in how non-Black people of color often aspire to Whiteness by conforming to anti-Black norms of respectability; simultaneously, the Human requires the continuation of an exterior to define itself against. Even as new populations are marked as subjects under the nation-state, Black and Indigenous death remains a defining characteristic of civil society. However, as writing *creates* economies of difference to map identity into discrete zones, using Western grammars as a locus of analysis need not fall into the trap King isolates. Instead, abolition is oriented towards the eradication of hierarchies of difference themselves rather than transcendence or assimilation.

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*alone, we are lost  
together we find fleeting moments of  
freedom  
conjoined with memory  
with rage  
with sorrow  
with hope  
to bring us  
side by side  
as we create  
the impossible*

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### **Conclusion: A Way Out**

*The critics fear that an absence of any independent ground or neutral observation-language from which to assess and possibly modify our present beliefs and practices would lead to a world without controls – where unmoored subjects would act as though “anything goes” and where rational inquiry and communication would be impossible. –Gaonkar, pp. 18*

Throughout this paper, I argued that Western grammars, in a Derridean sense, are integral in (re)producing the carceral and anti-Black category of the Human. This occurs in three primary ways. First, the West constructs the (Black) non-Human as oppositional to the (White) Human in civil society. This is done by attaching Blackness and Whiteness to signifiers, such as guilt and innocence, to justify mass incarceration, surveillance, and police brutality against Black bodies. In political institutions, particularly the judiciary, the visual and rhetorical signifier

of Blackness is associated with suffering. This creates semicapitalism and racial capitalism as images of quotidian anti-Black violence are normalized, circulated, and consumed across civil society. Second, the West intertwines temporality with writing to create narratives of political progress and historical amnesia. By reading the past, present, and future as distinct temporal zones, the state divests itself of responsibility from the slave trade and settler colonialism, violences that were, and remain, integral in the creation and evolution of civil society. In tandem with this, the future is constructed as a space of safety that must be secured through expanded warfare. Warfare thus extends beyond the battlefield and into simulations of potential futures through planning. By expanding surveillance through both technological innovation and military intervention, the West maximizes its data collection to perfect preemption against all bodies considered inherently threatening (non-Human) to justify genocide and the expansion of empire. Finally, the origins of Western grammars are ontologized in the slave trade. Writing, in the West, creates its own originary moment in the slave trade to mystify the ateleological nature of grammars, making static the temporality of rhetoric to render it predictable and obfuscate the creation of the Human.

I further asserted that, as a political praxis and epistemology, abolitionism is one way to create alternative grammars and dismantle the Human. This is because abolitionists imbue present movements and protests with historical memory to shape visions of different futures. By connecting genealogies of struggle with affects of rage and desire, abolitionists disrupt and evade the process of temporal and rhetorical capture that produces the Human. As such, abolition disrupts the matrix of predictability that Western grammars produce, making simulated warfare impossible. The entanglement of writing, temporality, affect, and kinship in the project of abolitionism thus creates alternative grammars geared towards deconstructing the Human.

Considering this, can writing ever escape its construction in civil society? I argue that, yes, it can. Abolition demystifies the obfuscation of Western grammars, a process that is intrinsically intertwined with non-linear temporalities as abolition undermines the ontologization of origins. Specifically, Derrida argues that “the ideal of the language of origin...a language that *has not yet* been corrupted by articulation, convention, supplementarity. The time of that language is the unstable, inaccessible, mythic limit between the *already* and this *not-yet*: time of a language *being born*...Neither before nor after the origin” (265, emphasis in original). To suspend Western grammars from their “originary” moment of the slave trade is to find a liminal zone of existence, a positionality that is both already and not-yet here. Abolitionist pedagogies, through non-linear temporalities and non-Western kinships, are thus always already being born in new iterations. Rather than being divested of meaning through (re)signification, abolition finds a grammar in a condition of (im)possibility, an envisioning of purportedly unrealistic political and social goals to build new futures.

I cannot say, however, what a world without Western grammars or the Human would look like as that world does not yet exist. As Derrida states, “For that world to come and for that within it which will make the values of sign, word, and writing tremble, for that which here guides our future anterior, there as yet is no exergue” (5). Ultimately, abolition can only be an ongoing struggle to undermine the carceral and anti-Black category of the Human, creating new modes of writing and language imbued with affect. While this future is uncertain and unpredictable, a dissolution of Western grammars remains a necessity in escaping the Human and its production of difference.

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*what is revolution without  
the ghosts of the past  
the cries of the present  
the light of the future  
to guide us  
as we seek  
something other than  
Human*

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